**Experiential learning**

**Experience-based learning - guide to facilitating effective experiential learning activities**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Experiential learning is also referred to as experiential teaching, or experiential training and development, or experiential activities, and other variations of these terms.  However the word **learning** is significant, since it emphasizes the **learner's perspective**, which is crucial to the experiential learning concept.  Conversely, the words **training** and **teaching** significantly reflect the **teacher or training perspective** (on behalf of the teaching or training organization - e.g., a school or employer).  **Experiential learning** is therefore the most meaningful name for this concept.  The word **experiential** essentially means that **learning and development are achieved through personally determined experience and involvement**, rather than on received teaching or training, typically in group, by observation, listening, study of theory or hypothesis, or some other transfer of skills or knowledge.  The expression 'hands-on' is commonly used to describe types of learning and teaching which are to a lesser or greater extent forms of experiential learning.  The expression 'chalk-and-talk' (the teacher writes on a board and speaks while learners listen and look and try to absorb facts) refers to a style of teaching or training which contains no experiential learning aspect whatsoever.  We might also regard **experiential learning** as **growing a person from the inside**, whereas conventional teaching and training is the transfer of capability into a person from the outside.  Experiential learning is determined and controlled by the individual for the purpose of achieving personal development and growth, whereas conventional training and teaching tend to be designed and delivered by an organization for the purpose of developing the capabilities (usually knowledge and/or skills) of a group of people, necessary to meet organizational needs or to achieve a known measurable standard or qualification.  There is a place for many types of learning and teaching/training, and specifically these two types:   * Conventional prescribed teaching/training - the transfer of pre-determined knowledge/skills - 'from the outside, usually for an external purpose'. * Experiential learning - development of people as individuals - 'from the inside, usually for an internal purpose'.   People need certain prescribed skills and knowledge for their education and their work. But they also need to be helped to develop as individuals too, which interestingly also carries many benefits for external purposes.  In work and society most problems stem from people feeling unhappy or being unfulfilled. Conventional skills/knowledge transfer training/teaching does little to counter these effects. Individual growth - via experiential learning - most certainly offers ways to address personal feelings of confidence, fulfillment, sense of purpose, etc.  In conventional teaching and training the needs of the 'organization' (which might be an employer or school or college, etc) are the primary driver of the learning content, design, delivery and assessment. In experiential learning the starting point is quite different - the starting point is the person, and the primary driver is to help the individual grow and learn and develop in their own direction and in their own way.  Unfortunately the notion of developing people as individuals is regarded by many employers (and much of the educational establishment) as less efficient and effective than conventional training and teaching.  This is because employers and educational policy-makers tend to see training and teaching in terms of organizational or bureaucratic requirements, or in terms of qualifications and standards, or in terms of short-term costs and efficiencies; and given this basic assumption it's easy to see why so much training and teaching avoids the costs and time in developing individuals, when the priority is so strongly to manage and achieve organizational or systemic requirements.  The benefits however of **developing people as individuals** (in addition of course to transferring capabilities necessary to pass exams and contribute to organizational activities) are huge. By developing people as individuals - rather than simply transferring arbitrary capabilities - we develop people's confidence, self-esteem, personal strengths, and crucially a rounded sense of purpose and fulfillment which fundamentally improve attitude, life-balance and emotional well-being. These immensely important outcomes are just as important for sustainable productive work and a healthy society as the essential skills and knowledge typically represented in conventional education and work-related training.  Developing people as individuals, which is at the heart of experiential learning, also implicitly enables learning methods to fit each person's own preferred [learning styles](http://businessballs.com/vaklearningstylestest.htm) and natural preferences, because learners are encouraged and helped to learn and develop in their own ways, using methods which they find most comfortable and therefore enjoyable.  When people can be helped to discover that learning and development itself can be fun and emotionally rewarding, then we provide a platform for all sorts of learning and development in the future. Conversely, when we subject people to inappropriate teaching or training, which does not interest them or fit their preferred learning style, we put people off learning and development, sometimes permanently. |  | Different types of learning and development are required for different purposes.  Conventional teaching and training are based mainly on knowledge/skills transfer, but this does not address individual growth and potential particularly well.  This is because conventional skills/knowledge transfer usually assumes (wrongly) what the individual needs to learn, and the best way in which they can learn it. In addition, the subject matter tends to be focused on organizational needs, or the need to pass an exam, which are usually a little different (sometimes a lot different) from an individual's natural strengths and preferred personal direction.  **Experiential learning** is a powerful way to address individual growth and potential, which is commonly a much neglected approach to teaching and developing people of all ages.  **Experiential learning** is adaptable for individual style, preferences, strengths, direction, etc. As such it is more likely than conventional prescribed training or teaching to produce positive emotional effects, notably confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of personal value and purpose.  People need learning which is adaptable for them as individuals, and also the traditional prescriptive teaching and training focused on external needs, typically of the organization, or to pass exams or gain qualifications.  It is important to use the best sort of learning and development methods for the given situation.  Only a balance of methods can satisfy organizational and external needs, and also help the individual grow as a confident and contented person.  Organizations and those who formulate educational policies should consider that organizations and societies function better when people are fulfilled and growing according to their natural preferences, far more than they do by being skilled and measured in the extremely narrow competencies that those in authority deem to be vital.  Teaching and training people must focus on individual potential and styles, as well as on the needs of the surrounding system. |

Experiential learning, especially used at the beginning of a person's new phase of learning, can help to provide a positive emotional platform which will respond positively and confidently to future learning, even for areas of learning which initially would have been considered uncomfortable or unnecessary.

Experiential learning also brings into play the concept of [multiple intelligences](http://businessballs.com/howardgardnermultipleintelligences.htm) - the fact that people should not be limited by the 'three Rs' and a method of teaching based primarily on reading and writing.

Experiential learning is a way to break out of the received conditioned training and teaching practices which so constrain people's development in schools and work.

It does this because it is centered on the individual - not the training or the surrounding system. It works on the basis that people can and should be developed from the inside out, not the other way around. In merely transferring and conveying knowledge to a person we do very little to help them grow as individuals, and when we starve this need most people quickly begin to lose confidence and hopes of becoming someone special in life.

Differences between experiential learning and conventional training and teaching might be represented simply as:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **conventional training** | **experiential learning** |
| training-centered/focused - theoretical | learner-centered/focused - really doing it |
| prescribed fixed design and content | flexible open possibilities |
| for external needs (organization, exams, etc) | for internal growth and discovery |
| transfers/explains knowledge/skills | develops knowledge/skills/emotions via experience |
| fixed structured delivery/facilitation | not delivered, minimal facilitation, unstructured |
| time bound measurable components (mostly) | not time bound, more difficult to measure |
| suitable for groups and fixed outcomes | individually directed, flexible outcomes |
| Examples: PowerPoint presentations, chalk-and-talk classes, reading, attending lectures, exam study, observation, planning and hypothesizing, theoretical work, unreal role-play. | Examples: learning a physical activity, games and exercises, drama and role-play which becomes real, actually doing the job or task, 'outward bound' activities, teaching others, hobbies, pastimes, passions. |

I am grateful to [Martin Thompson of MTA](http://www.mta-international.com), an expert in the experiential learning field for the following detailed explanation of the concept and its core principles, chiefly as they apply to the facilitation of experiential learning activities and events. The article below is based on an item written in January 2008 by Martin Thompson called 'Experiential Learning in Action: Beyond the Ropes' which was first published in the New Zealand Human Resources Institute Magazine.

While mainly focused on organized experiential activities, games, events and exercises, etc, the principles below can be adapted for other forms of experiential learning and development, for example job secondments and specially delegated projects, for which the techniques below offer an immensely helpful alternative approach compared with conventional methods of task-based review, which tend to ignore many valuable individual learner opportunities and lessons.

The essence of effective experiential learning is that the entire process is centered (centered to USA-English speakers, sorry) on the learner - not the task, not the organizational objective, not the qualification standard, not the group, and certainly not the trainer's or the teacher's personal opinions. In this respect the underpinning philosophy of well executed experiential learning has much in common with the principles of good modern [life coaching](http://businessballs.com/lifecoaching.htm), and also interestingly in [facilitative decision-making methodology](http://businessballs.com/sharondrewmorgenbuyingfacilitation.htm), both of which place the other person at the centre of the issue, not the coach, seller, or organization.

**Experiential learning activities - concept and principles**

The conceptual basis of the process of experiential learning is commonly related to [Kolb's Learning Cycle](http://businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm) (Kolb and Fry 1975). This model can be developed for experiential learning and summarized in the diagram below.

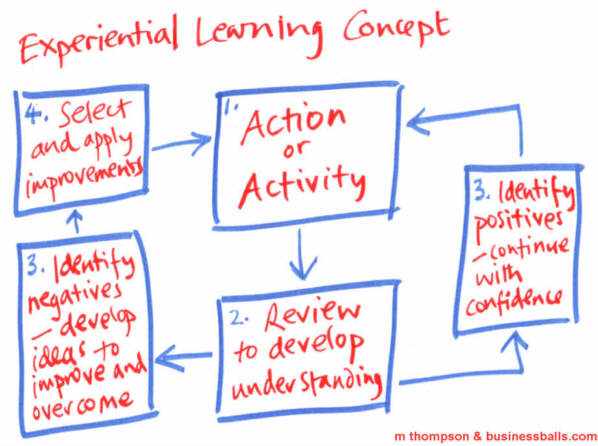


Diagram adapted from [Kolb's learning styles and process theory](http://businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm) as it might be applied to experiential learning.

This 'Learning Cycle' provides a helpful simple diagram of the process of experiential learning, which is broadly:

1. do
2. review
3. Develop and implement ideas for improvement.

Here follow the principles of experiential learning on greater detail, especially as they relate to organized activities, events and games, etc.

**1 - Learner is central**

The learner is central to the process throughout, the facilitator provides the learner with a service. The principle that the success of the experiential approach to learning depends on the learners is fundamental. Therefore the facilitator must understand that learners can only make best use of their opportunities if they are ready, willing and able to become personally involved in the learning process: learners have to be prepared to actively develop their understanding, critique and evaluate the messages in their context and then work hard to apply appropriate learning.

**2 - Facilitation must be light and subtle**

Principle 2 Individuals can and do learn without facilitation. Learners learn experientially by reflecting on their experiences, developing personal insights and understandings through involvement in intellectual, emotional and physical activity. This can be (and often is) done by an individual without any external help. A facilitator is not a prerequisite. Experiential learning involves people in working things through for themselves and developing their own understanding, so facilitators should always be seeking ways to enable this to happen. Although effective facilitation can add tremendous value, facilitators should remember that inappropriate facilitation can hinder, rather than help learning; they should not instruct, proffer knowledge, proscribe or offer personal wisdom.

**3 - find/create experiential learning opportunities**

A facilitator should help create learning opportunities and enable others to recognize and make good use of these opportunities. The facilitator can provide help during each element of the learning cycle by creating an appropriate learning environment, providing an activity that will initiate the learning process, creating an atmosphere and framework conducive to constructively critical review, (guiding thinking and challenging to developing understanding) ensuring that any conceptual thinking is progressed to meaningful conclusions and opportunities for improvement identified. Facilitation is a complex and skilled process.

**4 - Reactions to experiences vary so don't pre-judge**

You cannot predict the learning an individual will take from an activity. Because individuals are personally involved in experiential learning individuals can take very different messages from a single event. An obvious example is one where a person fails to listen to another. If they are to learn, both individuals need to understand their part in their failure to communicate, but the causes could be numerous and therefore each person’s learning very different. So for example, behaviors seen in an individual who isn't heard could be; doesn't express ideas clearly, doesn't check the 'listener has understood', speaks when the other person isn't ready to listen, doesn't help the listener understand the significance of the information, fails to develop the idea, backs down when challenged, etc. Similarly example reasons why a 'listener' doesn't listen could be; doesn't see the issue as being important, had prejudged the issue, is distracted by personal thoughts, doesn't respect the other person (and or their views). Therefore one event can provide the individuals involved with quite different or even diametrically opposed learning.

**5 - Single events can enable several different learning effects**

There is potential for the learning to be at several levels. In the example used in note 4 above I gave behaviors for not being heard, but reasons for not listening. Typically addressing and developing behavioral change is less challenging than addressing the reasons. Taking the example from above, it can be seen that there is a hierarchy of challenge that the facilitator can encourage the learner to address: realizing the need (e.g. I won't be listened to if the other person is speaking) developing the skill (e.g. speaking clearly and concisely) developing the confidence or self esteem (e.g. believing that I and my views are of value) challenging personal attitudes (e.g. questioning personal drivers and belief systems).

**6 - Build confidence before addressing attitudes and behavior**

Developing basic skills in a supportive environment is relatively simple; changing day to day behavior is another matter. After having read this note it might be tempting to go straight to the fundamentals and target attitudes first. (If you have a positive attitude and personal confidence it is easier to implement personal change.) However remembering that the learner has to want to learn, it is far safer to build the learners confidence through success with skill development and behavioral change in simple or superficial areas first. When some progress has been made you can consider raising and tackling more fundamental issues like personal confidence and attitudes to others. It's worth being aware however, that a knock on effect of individuals beginning to use new skills and realize their benefits can be a growth in self esteem and personal confidence.

**7 - The activity must be real and engaging - not based on artificial impact**

A learning activity is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The purpose of an experiential learning activity is to create an opportunity for valuable and memorable personal leaning. The ideal activity will engage, stimulate and challenge with individuals becoming absorbed in the task as themselves. It will not involve role play in a conventional artificial sense. All activities must be designed, managed and facilitated carefully so that the activity has impact, but it isn't so memorable that these 'activity memories' override the impact and memory of the learning. If this happens the lasting memory may be an aspect of the activity, not the learning that was realized.

**8 - Ensure activities allow adequate and meaningful reviews**

An effective activity provides the opportunities for learning with as few distractions as possible. It can be great fun to run 'big activities' (although some people hate them) and there is no doubt that 'ropes' courses (as 'outward bound' activities are referred to in some parts of the world) and outdoor team challenges can generate real learning opportunities, but take care. Besides the risk of big events overpowering their intended lessons, the duration of these activities often means that many learning opportunities are lost; valuable incidents can get forgotten or overlooked or submerged in the complexity of the task. Although less memorable in themselves, running several short activities (10-30 minutes) each followed by its own review will often have far greater long term impact that one big activity.

**9 - Careful reviews of activities are crucial**

The learning review is a vital stage of every activity. It should be planned as part of the design, not left to chance. Reviews can take many forms but all must engage the learners. The ideal review will involve the learner in personal thought, challenge and discussion before coming to some form of conclusion. It is often useful if a period of individual reflection, guided by open-ended or tick-box questionnaires, is followed by a facilitated discussion. If it is to be of real benefit, the review must be an honest critique of what happened and the contributions of each individual. Real issues should not be swept under the carpet, but equally criticism must be constructive.

**10 - Accentuate the positives**

Concentrate learning and reviews on the positives more than the negatives. It is all too easy to focus on the negatives but this can seriously undermine confidence in the whole idea of learning and development if the negatives are over-emphasized, especially for people who are not especially robust. It's obvious that if something goes wrong, or just doesn't go as well as we hoped, there will be benefit in review and change. It can, however, be equally beneficial to review what's gone well. It's not only motivating to recognize and focus on success, but finding out what caused the success and seeking ways to make greater or wider use of it can reap tangible rewards.

**11 - Use stimulating questions in reviews, especially for groups discussions**

A review discussion is an opportunity for learners, helped by the facilitator, to develop their own understanding and draw their own conclusions. The role of the facilitator is to enable others to learn by drawing out the issues and developing the learning that is relevant to the individuals. The facilitator should ask questions that will stimulate thought about relevant issues and enable the group to use answers given to develop further thought and learning.

**12 - Resist temptation to give answers - ask questions only**

Don't tell people what they should learn. An observer is in a privileged position, often seeing aspects that are not obvious to others. If you observe a point that isn't raised during a review it is legitimate to raise it, but only through questioning. If, despite questioning, individuals don't relate to the point, there is no benefit in pursuing as any 'learning' will not be theirs. A better option is for you to run another activity designed to focus more attention on this specific point. Whatever happens, don't be tempted to provide a 'professional analysis' as this approach takes the ownership of the learning away from the individual.

**13 - Have faith in people's ability to learn for themselves**

Believe in the learners: they can and will make experiential learning opportunities work for them. To be an effective facilitator of experiential learning you have to believe, really believe, in others. You have to believe that they have the potential to make progress and be committed to the fact that your role is to provide opportunities for others to learn and progress.

**14 - It's about them not you**

Forget your ego. Your success is individuals capitalizing on their personal learning. As an effective facilitator you have to be satisfied with the knowledge that you offer and develop opportunities for others to learn, many of which will go unused or undervalued. You have to accept that you are not offering 'tangible and technical' contributions and therefore will not be able to look back and say 'I taught this person x or y'. If you're lucky however, every now and again in the years to come you will hear of some far-reaching consequences that will go way beyond what you might have hoped or imagined.

**15 - Getting started**

Perhaps not surprisingly the best way to start is to experience facilitating - actually have a go at it: experience the process. Find a group of people who are happy to be 'guinea pigs' and just try a simple activity that is tried and tested. Think about the activities you've experienced yourself in the past. Talk to other people. Ask the potential delegates if they have ideas and preferences or recommendations.

You might also want to look at the various experiential learning activities developed by Martin Thompson himself, linked from Martin's biography below.

© Experiential Learning Activities - Concept and Principles, Martin Thompson and MTA, 2008.